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SUBJECT: "SHAMBLES": EDITORIAL ON GUYANA'S PRECARIOUS
SITUATION

The following editorial in the Stabroek News June 5 edition describes well the precarious state of affairs that prevails in Guyana across the security, political, and economic spheres (despite a few inaccuracies about USG's involvement). The Stabroek News is Guyana's most respected daily newspaper.

BEGIN TEXT.

Shambles
Monday, June 5th 2006

It is hard to find a period in our recent history when everything that mattered seemed to be in a complete shambles. The security situation is a total disaster. A sitting minister has been murdered and weeks later not a suspect has been arrested and neither the police nor the government seems to have an inkling about what to do. When the government appears as paralysed and impotent as it does right now it is time for every citizen to begin to worry about his/her safety. The situation is the same with eight people murdered at Agricola/Eccles and the disappearance of 30 AK-47s from the army's HQ. Now, in recent days, the crime-besieged villages of Enterprise and Annandale have again suffered from murderous attacks by gunmen who have operated with impunity. There has been no response from the security services even though their much vaunted camping operation at the back of Buxton was supposed to yield an end to such attacks and the capture of the elusive gunmen.

On the economic front, the closure for two months of Omai Bauxite Inc because of stiff competition from Chinese ore is a telling sign of the jeopardy that primary commodity producers like Guyana face from the emerging market giants like China and Brazil. There will be no mercy or compassion only heartless and impersonal WTO rules. And if that wasn't enough trauma on top of the loss of sugar revenues beginning this year, the government has shot itself in the foot by defaulting on US\$20M worth of bauxite bonds issued by the administration of President Cheddi Jagan in 1994. It is a mind-boggling move that has already done incalculable damage to the creditworthiness of the government and even if the government reversed itself and paid up today, the serious investor will still have major doubts about whether it could be trusted.

Then there is the elections impasse. The Surujbally commission has managed to conjure a crisis of epic proportions because of its inept management of the verification/residency issue. If each member of that Commission had paid serious attention to their mandate and had conducted good faith negotiations on the matter

they might have realized two or three years ago that the best solution would have been to approach the courts for an urgent interpretation of the provisions governing the qualification of an elector. Presumably this would have satisfied all sides. The Commission has managed to leave this vital issue hanging just a few months before the scheduled poll with the result that aside from the deep automatic polarization that occurs at elections further tension is being generated at the level of the commission and from the constant salvos booming from the parties at each other.

The tapes

Into this volatile and dangerous brew has been added the controversy over the tapes allegedly of the Police Commissioner Winston Felix speaking to several persons. The government has now initiated proceedings that could result in the removal of the commissioner from office. There is clearly a groundswell of public opinion that if what was said on the tape was uttered by the police commissioner then he has a lot of explaining to do and that his credibility has been seriously hurt. Moving against him on that basis is therefore unexceptionable.

What is exceedingly troubling is that the campaign against the police commissioner appears to have been choreographed by those close to businessman Roger Khan, for whom an arrest warrant has been issued by the police and who has since been indicted by the US authorities on a drug charge. To have your top cop weakened and emasculated when he really needed to be in full charge of his force and to be on top of crime is not the most propitious circumstance for the country at this point.

GEORGETOWN 00000532 002 OF 003

But that is what Mr Khan et al have succeeded in accomplishing and the government had better be careful in this dangerous period.

The timeline of the key events leading up to the move against Mr Felix is instructive. On March 1 this year the US State Department issued its annual report on the drugs trade and money laundering in which it named Mr Khan as a known drug trafficker. It appears that sometime after this, in a bid to extricate himself from this dilemma, Mr Khan engaged the US authorities and had a meeting with them. His version of the meet was that he was discussing an alleged conspiracy against the government and the lack of intent on the part of the police in tackling the Buxton criminals. The US says he was met to discuss impending drug proceedings against him. Several of the infamous tapes with the alleged Felix voice were played by Mr Khan at this meeting. It also appears that around this time some of the tapes were also dispatched to senior government officials and Mr Felix and others in the security services became aware of them.

On March 19 this year, the first series of raids against several of Mr Khan's establishments were conducted under the rubric of recovering the missing AK-47s. Up to that point there had been no robust campaign by the joint services to find these weapons even though they had been reported as missing since February 27, three weeks earlier. Surely the most appropriate time to have conducted this operation would have been immediately upon discovering that the weapons had vanished. It would seem that the joint services had discovered that Mr Khan was playing hardball and by circulating tapes with possibly compromising statements by joint services officials he presented a clear and present danger to them. Self-preservation had apparently kicked in for Mr Khan and key officials in the joint services. The day after the first raids against Mr Khan, the first tape supposedly between Mr Felix and Mr Basil Williams was circulated to the media. In the days to come, the country was treated to

raid after raid which were characterized as the search for the weapons but which may have been influenced by other factors. It was only on Saturday that an AK-47 was found and this has been claimed as one from the missing batch though presumably more authentication would have to be done. Even if this is one of the weapons, the joint services campaign has not impressed in its mapping and execution of the recovery operation and the reality would be that 29 rifles and five hand guns are still circulating. Moreover, rifles similar to those that went missing have been used in recent attacks and crime remains as out of control as it has been - the minister's murder (April 22) occurring during the period of intense joint services activity.

Days after the raids began the police issued a wanted bulletin for Mr Khan which he immediately challenged and went underground and then the US got into the act by unsealing an indictment against Mr Khan in early May. More tapes followed and as a result of the furore generated by these Mr Felix now faces the threat of removal from office.

In the circumstances, the average Guyanese who is seeking only better security could be excused for feeling that he or she is a mere pawn in a high stakes battle involving a businessman indicted for drugs, security officials seeking to preserve their status and the US promoting its own interests. Crime fighting in this manoeuvring is merely incidental. It should be noted that Mr Khan has only begun to speak of his alleged crime-fighting in 2002/3 now that he faces arrest and extradition. By implication he puts himself on the side of the government and presumably may have recordings and information that may link him with officialdom. Is that what comes next?

How connected and clued the government is to all of this is still unclear. It must know however that it bears primary responsibility for fighting crime and thus far it has failed disastrously. With a weakened police commissioner, rampant crime, underworld machinations and election venom, the only reasonable antidote for the country is professional help for the security forces from outside. There is no time for shilly-shallying and hand-wringing. On their poor performance alone, Mr Felix, his predecessors and several other top functionaries in the security services could have been removed a long time

GEORGETOWN 00000532 003 OF 003

ago. What it has failed to do since 1992 in terms of professionalizing the force and orienting it to properly fight crime the PPP/C government must do in the next few months probably with the help of the private sector and friendly countries such as Canada. It must also ensure that it isn't compromised by the underworld and those who play fast and loose with law and order. No time can be lost even if more tapes are played; especially if more tapes are played.

END TEXT.

BULLEN